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SUBJECT: UNEP Supporting Study of Depleted Uranium in Iraq; Urges Clean-Up Despite Lack of Documented Problem

¶1. Summary: The United Nation Environment Program (UNEP) organized a one-day training seminar on May 31 in Amman to review depleted uranium (DU) in Iraq. Iraqi officials at the seminar said that DU presents serious health risks and is responsible for higher cancer rates in and around Basra. International experts said that DU presents negligible risks except in extreme circumstances. UNEP Iraq Task Force Chairman Pekka Haavisto urged that the DU problem be studied further and that DU sites be cleaned up. End summary.

¶2. Depleted uranium (DU) is a dense metal used in munitions for its penetrating ability and as a protective material in armored vehicles, and was used by UK and American forces in the Balkans and in the Gulf War.

¶3. In their presentations on May 31, both the Iraqi Deputy Minister of Health and the Deputy Minister of Environment expressed strong concern about depleted uranium and increasing cancer rates, especially in the southern city of Basra and the surrounding area. They said Iraqi government studies found that the cancer risk there has increased by two to three times since the 1991 Gulf War. (Note: These are local studies and have not been internationally verified.)

¶4. Pekka Haavisto, chairman of the U.N. Environment Program's Iraq Task Force, said that the UNEP would assist Iraq as much as possible with DU, especially to assess the situation. He said UNEP's approach to DU in the Balkans called for marking and monitoring affected sites, and ultimately making efforts to clean them up. The Balkans studies identified a number of uncertainties requiring further investigation, according to UNEP. These include the extent to which depleted uranium on the ground can filter through the soil and eventually contaminate groundwater, and the possibility that depleted uranium dust could later be re-suspended in the air by wind or human activity, with the risk that it could be breathed in.

Studies Show Effects on in Worst-Case Scenarios
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¶5. UNEP officials said UNEP conducted environmental measurements on DU sites in Kosovo in 2000, Serbia and Montenegro in 2001, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2002. UNEP was involved in the IAEA DU assessment in Kuwait in the spring of 2002. All these studies confirm that DU has environmental impacts, according to UNEP. Health risks primarily depend on the awareness of people coming into contact with DU. Radiological and chemical effects of DU are likely to occur only under worst-case scenarios (such as breathing DU dust). UNEP DU reports always recommend precautionary action such as measurement, signing, fencing, and clean up of the targeted sites to avoid possible health risks.

Presentations and Discussion
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¶6. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Mark Melanson, a DU expert based in Washington D.C., gave a detailed presentation on the physical properties of DU and discussed how it is used in munitions by U.S. forces. Dr. Carr from the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that the WHO is willing and ready to help Iraq but she said that there is a lack of data on the DU situation and its effects. In his presentation on "The Use of DU in Munitions," Dr. David Smith from the UK Defense Ministry concluded that contamination from DU is localized and has no detectable health effects except in extreme circumstances. (NOTE: This would include inhalation of DU dust, which would normally be dispersed. END NOTE.)

¶7. Following the May 31 seminar, UNEP organized a two-day workshop for 16 Iraqi participants, including two Deputy Ministers, from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Environment. Participants received an overview on DU field measurement techniques, and reconnaissance and sampling strategies. UNEP donated beta and gamma radiation measurement equipment to the Iraqi Ministry of Environment and a second batch of equipment will be handed to the participants at a second workshop planned for Switzerland later in 2005.

¶8. Comment: UNEP's dogged focus on DU despite DU's well-documented lack of ill effects is drawing attention and resources away from much more serious environmental and health issues. UNEP is intent on carrying out the depleted uranium project despite clear evidence from experts that DU presents minimal risk and despite the fact that Iraq has no shortage of real and pressing environmental issues.

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